

◆◆◆ OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

SENSORY TEMPERAMENT – Sensory Avoidant

There are many people who are very sensitive to a variety of input around them. Having to tune in to every little noise, sight, movement, smell, or touch can be a lot of work, especially on a nervous system trying to function in a structured environment. When a person is overwhelmed by the sensory demands around them, they may desperately seek to avoid more sensory input.

There are also people who have difficulty working in multi-sensory environments because of the amount of attention shifting required. Each time information comes from another channel, they have to stop processing the sensory information (task, activity) they were involved with and prepare to process information through another channel. This can become overwhelming in very busy environments and can also result in a need to reduce sensory input.

Some people have challenges with self regulation, and the level of arousal of their nervous system has a lot to do with the sensory environment. When these people become upset or agitated, what helps them the most is backing out of the environment and temporarily finding a sensory reduced area. This helps them recover from sympathetic system activation and allows the parasympathetic system to work to clear stress hormones out of the body and allow the person to feel more calm.

Most often, people who become sensory avoidant are also sensory sensitive, so it may be useful to review strategies for dealing with sensory sensitivities. Once a person has become fully sensory avoidant, that person will likely have great difficulty in any environment until sensory reduction and calming strategies have been initiated. Forcing such a person to comply with rules, schedules, procedures would be like trying to calm a person in the middle of a fire; it will not work. First, the person must leave the environment, and then a variety of strategies can be used to de-escalate the situation. Preventing a person from leaving an environment which is 'too much' is dangerous and non-productive. These people need to learn (and be supported in learning) how to leave an offending environment, and how to engage in activities and environments that will be calming. This will happen after you prepare environments and activities and demonstrate to the child that these options are available.

After experiencing overload in a busy environment, people are generally not ready for a lot of structure and external control until they have regained control of their body. Having the bloodstream flooded with adrenaline and other stress hormones is not likely to feel good, and can really exacerbate feelings of helplessness and being out of control. People need to find what works in this initial stage of de-escalation and then be allowed to use effective strategies.

When someone is overly agitated and moving into sensory avoidant mode, ideas that might help:

Running up and down stairs	jumping on a trampoline or rebounder
Pushing or pulling heavy items	hanging from the arms
Small, dark, quiet areas	yelling, singing,
Having familiar items and materials	having people back off

People who are trying to reduce sensory demands often run on 'automatic pilot' to simplify their own sensory processing demands. For example, if I always sit in the same chair when I eat (or do a task), this means that my visual environment is predictable, as I will face the same way and see

much the same things each time I sit down. If the environment is very busy, and I am asked to change my pattern and sit somewhere else, everything changes. The visual environment is different and sound may be different in a different area. If I am sensory sensitive, I may need to process all of this 'new' information before I can settle down. Keeping everything the same, then, reduces sensory processing demands and allows the nervous system to habituate or ignore sensory input that is not novel or changing. Becoming rigid in my routines or rituals, therefore, can be an attempt to manage the sensory environment and not feel overwhelmed by competing sensory input. If a person is upset or agitated, that is not the time to try a new work area or a new way of doing things. Remember, predictability and sameness have a calming effect, especially for someone who is aroused or prone to sensory sensitivity.

Using schedules and lists, then, can be a major tool for helping prevent overload, and for helping a child to recover from overload or overarousal. When a person can see what the next little while will look like, then each transition will be less stressful, especially if sensory strategies are incorporated. For example, having a calm down schedule might include: jumping on a trampoline, walking up or down stairs, breathing or blowing practice, fine motor activity, getting a drink, doing spelling, re-joining the class. For the child to know (and help plan) the activity sequence gives a sense of predictability and control which is calming to the nervous system. Additionally, the schedule can incorporate environmental strategies such as dim lights, school library, calm music, quiet voices, etc, which also calm the nervous system and allow higher behaviours.

Calming is not a cognitive or social behaviour. It is a neuropsychological process which is highly dependent on the sensory environment and the biochemical processes within the body. The key to having these systems work effectively is a feeling of well being and safety. Those with sensory processing skills within expected ranges really have no idea how hard it is to self calm without a feeling of safety.

Sensory calming may help a sensitive child to manage a challenging environment, or to recover from overload. Examples of sensory calming strategies include:

Sensory reduction (see above)	slow rocking, swinging, bouncing, walking
Weighted products	headphones/white noise
Deep pressure	tactile input
Calm, relaxing music	dim incandescent lights
Fish tanks, calming visual motion	fidget items to keep hands busy
Progressive muscle relaxation	breathing exercises

In summary, when a person becomes sensory avoidant as a result of stress or sensory processing demands, the person must be helped to avoid and to engage in sensory reduction. The child should learn to anticipate this or feel it coming and proactively seek a break or calming strategy. When this is not possible, then the child should learn to leave the environment and engage in sensory reduction. Once stress hormones are flushed away and the child is calm again, then re-joining the target environment can be attempted, hopefully with some new understanding and strategies.

When working with a sensory sensitive person, Considering the child's complete sensory profile is very helpful, as is consultation with an occupational therapist who has experience with sensory processing.